

## VI || ALEXANDRE KOJÈVE

### The Emperor Julian and His Art of Writing\*

. . . For one must not speak of the ineffable.

Julian (218<sup>a</sup>)

When on the cage of an elephant you see the inscription  
"buffalo," don't believe your eyes.

Kouzma Proutkov

In a book on the art of writing which has been justly noted because it is truly noteworthy, Leo Strauss has reminded us of what has tended to be too easily forgotten since the nineteenth century—that one ought not to take literally everything that the great authors of earlier times wrote, nor to believe that they made explicit in their writings all that they wanted to say in them.

In fact, the old art of writing rediscovered by Leo Strauss consisted in writing almost the opposite of what one thought, in order to camouflage what one said. This literary camouflage had two clearly distinct ends, which could, nonetheless, be combined. On the one hand, thought could be camouflaged to escape persecution resulting from intolerance, which arises necessarily as much from knowledge that is rightly shielded from doubt as from any opinion that is wrongly shielded from doubt. On the other hand, literary camouflage could serve to form an elite; writing was supposed to be able to inform those exceptional men who were capable of grasping the camouflaged doctrine which shocks prejudice, at the same time confirming average readers in their traditional ignorance, sometimes called learned and always supposed salutary. Thus

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the camouflage had a secondary pedagogical function, that of training the sagacity of the special reader. Last but not least, this art of writing was also an art of playing, if only by oneself, the author assuming the ironical attitude expressed in French by the saying *à bon entendeur—salut!*

In any event, this art of writing absolutely requires as a complement an art of reading between the lines, which, though quite neglected for some time, has been restored to respectability both in and by the writings of Leo Strauss. And that is why I thought I might be able to honor him by trying in my turn to read between the lines of the writings of an author worthy of him, for the author in question is not only an ancient philosopher but also an authentic emperor, although an ineffective one because he was behind—or ahead of—his time.

The philosophic writings of the Emperor Julian are particularly interesting for two additional reasons. Julian referred explicitly to that “art of writing” of which Leo Strauss has spoken in almost identical terms apparently without knowing what his august predecessor had said of it. Also, the fate of these writings shows that an author can speak openly of this art without thereby being prevented from using it himself with full success.

The *Consolation* which Julian addresses to himself on the occasion of the departure of his friend Sallust (spring of 358 A.D.) was written earlier than those of his works which are called philosophic. Among other things to be found therein is this:

Now I am left behind alone and deprived of our honest association and our free converse. For now I know no one with whom I might speak so boldly. Is it not still easy to converse with myself? Will someone take my thought from me, too, and compel me to think and to wonder other than as I wish? . . . Since, then, no one can take that away from us [to think, if not to say all that one wishes], then we [Julian], surely shall manage to keep company with ourselves somehow or other. . . .<sup>1</sup>

This tells us in advance that, without thereby changing his opinions, Julian too will henceforth cultivate that ancient art of writing which aims to camouflage thoughts. Julian warns Sallust, as well as his other readers capable of understanding his hints, that henceforth he will not write all that he thinks and does not think all that he will have written. He recalls this shortly before his death in dedicating to the same Sallust his ironical discourse, *On King Helios* (December 362 A.D.), in which, between the lines, he makes fun of theology in general (the pagan as much as the Christian) and of the so-called Neo-Platonic mysticism in particular.

In the discourse, *To the Uneducated Dogs (or Cynics)*, (in which Julian attacks the monks, too, while feigning to criticize only the neo-Cynics of his time and, further, opposing them to Antisthenes and Diogenes, whom he admires), it is said in passing: "As for me, with respect to the gods, . . . I wish to say only the pious things" (187°). Several months previously, the Emperor had spoken in great detail about many pagan divinities in his discourse, *On the Mother of the Gods* (inspired in part by Lucian's *Syrian Goddess*). Several months later he availed himself of another opportunity in the discourse, *On King Helios*, which is an intentional parody of the writings of Iamblichus. It is clear that Julian did not really believe what he had written about the gods in these two discourses and that he kept silent as to what he truly thought of the gods. Yet nothing, it seems, prevented him from developing therein whatever theological conceptions he had, if any, concerning pagan theology. Moreover, nothing permits us to suppose that his reason for concealing what he thought of the pagan gods was that he had remained a true Christian after his official apostasy. We are thus forced to admit that, in indicating that he kept his true thoughts about any divinities to himself, Julian wished to indicate that in his opinion there were none. This radical, but silent or camouflage, atheism is also suggested by the fact that, in his two ostensibly religious and "mystic" discourses, the Emperor reproduces the themes of the pagan theology of his time (assimilable, in his view, to those of Christian theology) only insofar as those themes have in his opinion a particularly inept and ridiculous character, which he takes pains to emphasize discreetly by accentuating it.

After recognizing that, on becoming Emperor, the philosopher Julian ceases to say all that he thinks and even to think all that he says, one must ask the reason for this camouflage. Now, in his discourse, *In Response to the Cynic Heracleios* (Heracleios in fact designating not only a neo-Cynic philosopher, but also a Christian bishop or theologian), the Emperor recalls that in every age orators and writers with philosophic leanings camouflaged their thoughts for fear of reprisal: "[The poet who uses a certain kind of myth] wishes to exhort and instruct but in a concealed way. He does this in the case where he is afraid to speak clearly because he is anxious about being hated by the audience. This is how Hesiod too evidently wrote" (207<sup>a-b</sup>). Perhaps—but of whom and of what could a Roman Emperor be afraid? Julian evidently could not fear persecution by the dying paganism of his time. On the contrary, he could see that it was impossible in that age to dethrone the pagan gods without enthroning in their place the Christian divinity, whose adepts would have persecuted the atheist Emperor more effectively than pagans could have.<sup>2</sup> In the final analysis, then, it was for fear of the hatred of his

Christian audience that the Emperor combatted Christianity and that the philosopher camouflaged his atheistic attacks against pagan theology by skillfully wielding the Platonic irony in writings which, for this very reason, could be understood only by the philosophic elite, which is by definition an accomplice or harmless.

It can nonetheless be supposed that it was not solely for fear of Christian intolerance that Julian tried to restore paganism in the Roman Empire. He had many other reasons for doing it, of which the principal was undoubtedly a *raison d'État*. It is principally for this *raison d'État* that the Emperor camouflages the atheism of the philosopher. Julian himself gives us to understand this on several occasions—for example, when he says:

When we write about divine things, we must take care that the words do not lack the necessary exalted quality and that the speech be as moderate, beautiful, and appropriate to the gods as possible; and nothing shameful, blasphemous or impious must be introduced there, so that we do not incite the multitude to such boldness (218<sup>c-d</sup>).

It is doubtless in the same sense that one must interpret the fact that, after having related mockingly the ridiculous miracle that supposedly occurred in Rome upon the arrival of the idol of the Mother of the Gods, Julian adds:

Although this story will seem incredible to certain men, and in no way fitting for a philosopher or a theologian, nonetheless let it be told, because it has been written publicly by most historians and because it has furthermore been preserved by bronze statues in Rome, most powerful and dear to the gods. It does not escape me, however, that certain men who are too wise [that is, intellectuals without administrative or political responsibilities] will assert that this story is intolerable hog-wash told by old women. But I am of the opinion that where such stories are concerned, one should have faith in the cities more than in these subtle men, whose small souls possess, it is true, a piercing view but see nothing sound [viable] (161<sup>a-b</sup>).<sup>3</sup>

As an intellectual, Julian was in no way the dupe of "the cities" in matters of religion, nor of the agreement among "most historians" with regard to the supposed miracles, and he wanted nothing better than to be able to jibe at them. But as a philosopher, he did not believe he ought to refuse the Empire which was offered to him; and as Emperor, he devoted himself to restoring paganism for a *raison d'État*. Moreover, it is this *raison d'État*, and not fear of personal difficulties, which prompted Julian to camouflage in his works both his philosophic atheism

and the mockings of the unbelieving or skeptical intellectual that he was.

No doubt, if Julian had wanted to be simply Emperor, he should and could have given up completely those mockings and stopped his subtle jesting. Having remained a philosopher, however, he could not abandon philosophic pedagogy; in addressing his writings only to a mature elite, he took care that the tradition of what was for him the (discursive) truth should not be interrupted. The camouflaged mocking which escapes the vulgar permits the selection of strong minds who understand such ironies without being shocked by them, and who thus reveal that they are not so enslaved by prejudice as to be unapt to receive, perhaps with some benefit, a philosophic instruction which will itself be given them only between the lines for the same double reason of selection and secrecy.

Now, this is exactly what Julian himself tells us on occasion. Thus, in the discourse, *On King Helios* (in which Helios is at the same time the pagan divinity which the author exalts as Emperor, but which he derides as intellectual, and the symbol of the *nous* to which he appeals as philosopher), Julian speaks explicitly of his pedagogic vocation: "May the great<sup>4</sup> Helios [reason] grant that I no less<sup>5</sup> know about him and that I teach everyone generally (*κοινῇ*), but those worthy of learning particularly (*ἰδίᾳ*)" (157<sup>a</sup>). Here, the appeal to the philosophic elite and the exclusion of the mass of the profane are only indicated. Elsewhere, however, the author expresses himself in a more open fashion, as for example in the discourse, *In Response to the Cynic Heracleios*, where he says: "For not everything ought to be said; and even of those things which it is lawful to say [to an elite], certain things, in my opinion, must be kept quiet before the many" (239<sup>a-b</sup>). However, it must be done with art: the same camouflage which serves to hide from the vulgar the true meaning of what is said must attract the attention of the chosen few and provoke philosophic reflection in them. This is precisely what Julian himself tells us in his discourse, *On the Mother of the Gods*:

The Ancients always looked for the causes of things; . . . and when they had found them, they protected them with paradoxical myths, so that by means of the paradox and incongruity the counterfeit character [of what is said to us] would be detected and would turn us to the search for the truth [which is hidden from us or which is indicated only by hints]. I suppose that for the ordinary men there is sufficient benefit in the irrational story which is transmitted uniquely by [generally strange and contradictory] symbols, whereas for those who are exceptional in intelligence, the truth about the gods can be beneficial only on the condition that they search for, find, and grasp it [themselves] under the direction of the gods [that is to say, here, of reason, truly of philosophy], reminded by the enigmatic allu-

sions that there is something there that must be sought out, and thus they progress on the road of reflection to the end and, so to speak, to the summit of the question without shame or faith in the opinion of others more than in the activity of their own reason (170<sup>a-c</sup>).

As a good "Socratic," Julian the pedagogue did not want to indoctrinate, but to encourage to the philosophic quest all those, but only those, who might reveal themselves to be capable of it. That is why the philosopher Julian wanted to communicate his personal doctrine only in the form of a critique of received ideas (among others, Neo-Platonic ideas), this critique being, moreover, ironic and hence deliberately kept from the understanding of all those who were deemed unfit to understand it.<sup>6</sup> But if the philosopher-Emperor camouflaged his thoughts not only from fear or for *raison d'État*, but also with a view to a philosophic pedagogy, he seems to have done it equally because of that sort of modesty (which is, indeed, vain enough) that often prevents the initiates from divulging their mysteries to the profane—perhaps because they are not so certain of them as to hope to be able to demonstrate them convincingly to everyone. In any case, here is what we read in the discourse, *In Response to the Cynic Heracleios*:

However, those who wanted to elucidate the divine character of Dionysus [who is here at the same time the pagan god and Jesus Christ], covered the true state of things in the garb of a myth by speaking enigmatically of the "substance" of the god, of his cohabitation with his father, who was pregnant with him, in the "intelligible world," and of his "birth" in the world [of sense] which was not a begetting, . . . and of all the rest which was worthy of investigation. But it is not easy to express myself on all this—perhaps simply because I am still ignorant about the precise facts; but perhaps also because I do not want to bring forth the partly hidden and partly revealed god [by revealing that he simply does not exist], as at the theater before unproved ears and minds, more devoted to anything else than to philosophy (221<sup>c-d</sup>).

The same modest attitude appears also in the beginning of the discourse, *On the Mother of the Gods*, where Julian says, "Ought one to speak out on these things too; and shall we thus *write* on that which ought not to be spoken; and shall we carry outside things which ought not to be carried outside; and shall we prattle about what ought not to be prattled about?" (158; cf. also the ironical ambiguity at 172<sup>d</sup> where Julian again ridicules Neo-Platonism, as well as Plato himself).

Doubtless. It must not be forgotten, however, that there is much intellectual sport and philosophic amusement in the ironical art of writing of the Emperor Julian, who consciously followed an authentically Platonic

tradition. After the example of the great Plato, Julian the philosopher jested a great deal, particularly about things which the common run of readers sometimes take tragically and always endow with a seriousness which they consider profound. But, like Plato himself, Julian made fun of these things at the same time being careful not to shock the profane, and he, like Plato, did it so as to stir his chosen few to the intellectual effort, which is philosophic precisely insofar as it is deemed able to liberate from the prejudices "of the theater" and "of the forum" those who are capable of it, thus leading them to (discursive) wisdom—that is, to full satisfaction, perfectly conscious of itself.<sup>7</sup>

Many examples of the art of writing practiced by Julian could be given. For lack of space I shall content myself with a single example, which seems particularly convincing to me. It is concerned with what Julian thinks and says when he speaks, in his philosophic writings, of myths, both generally and particularly. Julian speaks of myths in all his pieces of a philosophic character. But his discourse, *In Response to the Cynic Heracleios*, is devoted entirely to the problem of myth in general and of theological myths, pagan as well as Christian, in particular (cf. 205<sup>b-c</sup>). The philosopher-Emperor explicitly formulates his own point of view at the very outset of his analysis, which begins as follows: "To discover the point at which the invention of myths began, as well as the person of him who first tried to relate false stories in a believable form for the profit or the diversion of his audience, is probably quite as impossible as to find the first man who sneezed or spat" (205<sup>c</sup>).

Obviously, in defining the myth as a false story told in a believable fashion, Julian consciously opposes the traditional definition, implicitly or explicitly admitted by all the theologians, including the Stoics. For these men, myths (or at least certain myths) are true stories which, however, present themselves in an unbelievable form, in the sense of being unlikely, or at least incomprehensible. The task of the pagan or Christian theologian, on that premise, consists in interpreting a myth so as to restate in likely and comprehensible (not to say reasonable or rational) speech the truth which the myth reveals (discursively). The truth of the myth is defined as a harmonizing of what the myth says with what it speaks about. Thus the truth of the myth is supposed to be the (discursive) revelation of a reality. More exactly, it is not the myth which reveals a reality. It is the reality, generally divine, which reveals itself in and through the myth. Thus, the theological myth is the unbelievable discursive form of a divine revelation, which reveals what is or really exists "outside of" its discursive revelation and independently of the mythical, that is, unbelievable form of the myth. This is the source of the possibility of interpreting the myth by rationalizing its (dis-

cursive) form, without thereby modifying the truth of its content (which is itself also discursive).

Now, none of this would be possible if the myths were what Julian says they are, namely, false stories. In effect, if the myth is a false story, that of which it speaks does not exist and cannot then reveal itself by this myth. In that case, therefore, the myths are not divine revelations, but human inventions. This is precisely what Julian tells us in the quoted passage. But how can it be known that a story is false? And why can it be affirmed that all myths are false? It seems that Julian used the criterion of truth which is immanent to discourse itself—the principle of contradiction. In admitting (*a priori*) that a discourse which contradicts itself could not correspond to a reality external to it, he defines myth as an account which is contradictory in its terms, and concludes (analytically) that all myths are false, at least in the sense that none of them corresponds whatsoever to anything real.

Now, according to Julian, all theological discourses are necessarily contradictory in their terms and hence mythical or false. This is at least what he seems to wish to tell us when he writes:

As for the things which it is lawful and blameless for both of us to speak and hear, all discourse is constituted by speech and by a meaning. Now, since the myth is also a sort of discourse, it too will probably be composed of these two elements. We shall consider each of these separately. In every discourse a simple meaning is implied; but this meaning can be presented also in a figure (*σχημα*). . . . The simple meaning is unique. . . . But that which is figuratively presented contains many varieties in itself, which will not be completely unknown to you if you have applied yourself to rhetoric. . . . However, at least for the present, I must speak of neither most nor of all of these [figurative] forms, but only of two of them, namely, the one with an exalted and the one with a contradictory meaning. The same thing is true also for speech [which can also be exalted or contradictory]. . . . Now, with regard to these two elements [namely, the meaning and the expression], when we write about divine things, we must take care that the words [that is to say, the expression] do not lack the necessary exalted quality. . . . This is why nothing contradictory must be found in speech of this type [that is to say when divine things are spoken of]. . . . Nonetheless, the contradictory character of the meaning must be admitted where the contradiction aims at a useful end, since the men [who are to be edified] do not need any hint from outside [which is then referred to a "reality"] but are instructed [or edified] by what is said in the myth itself . . . (218–219<sup>a</sup>).

We note first in this remarkable passage that theological myths are characterized by the contradictory character, not of their verbal expressions (which are taken to be "exalted"), but of their meaning. It is in and



by its meaning that the theological myth contradicts itself. The mythical expression, which is also artistic, can at best camouflage this contradiction (at least in the eyes of the "many"; see 213<sup>d</sup>), by giving it an "exalted" and "coherent," that is, "believable" appearance. More exactly, all myths have a contradictory meaning, because they contradict themselves by definition: what is not self-contradictory is not a myth, properly so-called. But one and the same contradictory meaning can have two different verbal expressions: the one makes the contradiction appear explicitly while the other dissembles it without suppressing it, so that it is only implicit. One must therefore distinguish myths which openly present themselves as having a contradictory meaning from those which hide—or pretend to hide—their contradiction by expressing themselves in apparently "exalted" and "coherent" discourse.

We shall shortly see that the telling of false stories without camouflaging their contradictory character in order to pass them off as true is what distinguishes poetry. But we have just seen that, according to Julian, if one aims to edify, it is necessary to dissimulate by apparently coherent speech the implied contradiction in the meaning of poetic works which treat divine things. We understand very well why this is so. In effect, the contradictory meaning cannot, by definition, correspond to any reality. To show by the very verbal expression that a story is contradictory is hence to present it openly as a fiction. And this is precisely what the poets do in telling their stories. On the other hand, the theologians claim to speak of real divinities. They are therefore obliged to camouflage verbally the contradictions inherent in the meaning of the stories they tell. Thus, it is the theologians who produce myths in the proper sense of the word, namely, "false stories [because contradictory] in a believable form [because apparently coherent]" (205<sup>c</sup>). Now, the art of finding an apparently coherent verbal form for a false meaning which is not simple or unique (the contradictory meaning being precisely double) belongs to rhetoric. Consequently, theology is a branch of rhetoric, which tries to find (apparently) coherent verbal expressions for the contradictory meanings of poetic works which have divine things for their subject.

Whatever the relations between theology, poetry, and rhetoric may be, Julian tells us clearly that according to him all myths are false stories. And we now know that these stories are false because their meaning is contradictory, in whatever verbal form they may happen to be cloaked.

Now, by the curious comparison of men's invention of myths with sneezing and spitting, Julian gives us to understand that there have always been and that there will always be myths on earth, as long as human beings live on it. Hence it can be asked why men invent false stories everywhere and always, sometimes taking them for true. Julian

himself replies to this question by saying that men invent myths either to be useful to the audience, or to divert it (cf. 205°).

Diversion falls in the realm of poetry. For, on the one hand, there is no poetry without myth, and, on the other hand, poetic myths serve only to divert. In any case, this is what emerges from the following passage:

Archilochus [who used myths, following Hesiod, in order to dissimulate his thoughts] was, further, perfectly conscious of the fact that poetry becomes a simple arrangement of rhymes if the myth is removed; for, by this fact, it is, so to speak, robbed of its specific character, and nothing poetic then remains. He gathered these sweet spices in the garden of the poetic Muse and added them to his creations precisely so that he would be considered not a sort of writer of lampoons, but a poet (207<sup>b-c</sup>).

Men therefore invent false stories in poetic play, and they will always do so, because they will never want to deprive themselves of diversion. There will always be poets or men who crave poetry.

But poets divert themselves and amuse others without claiming the truth of the stories which they tell in play. It matters little to them that these stories are strange or contradictory, since the poets present them as fictions with the sole purpose of diverting. On the other hand, the theologians scorn diverting play and claim to be useful to men. Consequently, they must present their own stories as true. And if they utilize false stories invented by the poets, they are obliged to give them a believable form, by dissimulating as much as possible the strange and contradictory character of their meaning. It is precisely the invention of "false stories with a believable form" that Julian compares to spitting and sneezing. According to him, there will be, everywhere and always, that is "necessarily," not only poetic myths—that is, false stories which are presented as such or as fictions—but also myths in the proper sense of the term: theological stories which, although in fact false too, claim nonetheless to be able to be useful to men to the extent to which men suppose that they ought to be believed.

Here again it must be asked why this is so. Why does Julian believe that everywhere and always there have been and will be false stories with a believable form? In the first place, let us note that Julian calls the theological myths believable solely because he establishes that the majority of people actually believe in them. For we have seen that for him, the meaning of all myths is false (because contradictory), so that the impression of truth which their verbal forms can sometimes give is necessarily a trap. Furthermore, in his opinion, this very appearance of truth is completely relative in most theological myths, and it amuses him to relate particularly absurd stories, willfully accentuating their grotesque character. In the course of this, he is aware that most people's

faith in the myths is such that even his burlesque of them will prevent almost no one from taking them seriously and from believing that Julian himself takes them seriously.

Now, if Julian realized that in theological matters men firmly believe in perfectly "unbelievable" things, he must have asked himself why they did so. At first glance, his rather indirect response is hardly satisfying, although traditional in ancient philosophy. It is that people believe in myths from "naïveté," that is, from lack of intelligence or, more exactly, because they do not notice the "strange and contradictory" character of what the myths tell.<sup>8</sup> But a much more profound response—"Hegelian" before its time—is perhaps found in a curious passage of the *Consolation*, where Julian speaks of Alexander as follows:

It is told that Alexander wished for a Homer, not to profit from his company, but for the propagation of his glory. . . . However, that man [Alexander] never looked to the present: he was never satisfied with what was accorded to him in his time and he was not content with the things which were [actually] given to him. Even if a Homer had befallen him, he would perhaps have longed for the Apollonian lyre, to which Apollo sang the nuptials of Peleus. For Alexander took this story [relative to Apollo] not for a simple product of Homer's understanding, but for a true deed which Homer had woven into the web of his poem (250<sup>d</sup>–251<sup>a</sup>).

Stated otherwise, a poet, in order to divert, invents a false story which he himself presents as a fiction; but in the eyes of another man, this same story can seem "believable" to the point of being considered true, in the sense of conforming to reality, even if it has a "strange and contradictory" character. Since the man in question is Alexander, there can be no question of naïveté or of lack of intelligence. Thus Julian indicates an entirely different reason, namely, a desire for glory (or "recognition," in the Hegelian sense of the word) which is not satisfied by the fame acquired in one's lifetime. Now, since Julian speaks of Alexander and of Homer, he certainly wishes to tell us that the desire for glory, or for "recognition," that leads men to transform poetic fictions into theological myths which people accept as true is such that it cannot be satisfied by any action performed on earth or by any eulogies earned there. Moreover, Julian carefully emphasizes that nothing occurring in the dimension of time could satisfy Alexander. That is to say that men believe in the truth of theological myths because these allow human beings to expect an eternal glory, an afterlife, in and through "recognition" on the part of immortal or divine beings. In short, men believe in the gods because they themselves wish to be immortal.

Julian could have stopped there, if myths were told only by poets (who devote themselves to fictions in play and to divert) or by religious men

(who flee reality because it does not satisfy them). But he knew that myths are found as well in the writings of philosophers, including the greatest of them. Now, for one thing, Julian regarded philosophy as more than a form of play or a diversion. For another, he did not think that it becomes a philosopher to fear death to the point of taking false stories, and "strange and contradictory" ones at that, for profound truths.<sup>9</sup> Finally, he did not believe "naïveté," that is, stupidity, to be characteristic of devotees of philosophy. Julian therefore needed to find another explanation for the existence of philosophic myths in general, and more particularly, for the presence of such myths in his own writings (see, for example, 227<sup>b</sup>-234<sup>e</sup>).

We already know the explanation. On the one hand, philosophers have given the form of myths to some of their doctrines for fear of the "many," whose (generally theological) prejudices they shock—either for physical fear of an occasionally even mortal danger (cf., e.g., 207<sup>a</sup>), or out of "moral" fear, out of that sort of intellectual modesty which restrains men from speaking promiscuously of certain things which are particularly dear, especially when to do so could uselessly trouble sincere consciences (cf., e.g., 239<sup>a-b</sup>). On the other hand, myths were often told by philosophers for reasons of philosophic pedagogy, in order to exercise the sagacity of the audience or the readers who are particularly gifted for philosophy, without thereby shocking the others (cf., e.g., 170<sup>a-c</sup>). Moreover, philosophers sometimes repeat theological myths in order tacitly to ridicule them and discreetly to expose their inanity to all those (but only those) who are receptive to hints and able to read between the lines.

But whatever the cause of philosophic myths may be, a philosopher truly worthy of the name, according to Julian, does not tell any myth whatsoever except for the purpose of its not being believed or, at least, its not being taken literally, or too seriously either. And it is actually with this intention alone that the philosopher Julian told myths in his philosophic writings, which were by definition destined only for the "initiates."

We know, however, that the Emperor Julian behaved in a completely different manner with respect to pagan theological myths. Even if he did not himself tell them to the people, he encouraged others to do so and he did everything in his power (which was, in fact, very little) to make these myths seem believable again to the great majority of the men he governed. As philosopher, Julian had, therefore, to give an account of his behavior as Emperor, or, if you please, to "justify" this behavior. And it is precisely to such a "justification" of the Emperor by the philosopher that the discourse, *In Response to the Cynic Heracleios*, is dedicated.

In this discourse, Julian seeks to find out "how and with what myths

ought to be composed, if, in a general way, philosophy somehow needs the invention of myths too" (205<sup>b</sup>). To reply to this question, Julian begins by asking what branch of philosophy might need myths—"false stories with a believable form." He says:

With regard to these different branches [of philosophy, namely, according to the Stoic tripartition, logic, physics, and ethics], the invention of myths is appropriate neither to logic nor to mathematics, which is a part of physics; but if this invention is appropriate to any of these branches at all, it is with practical philosophy [with ethics] that it is concerned, namely, with that part of it which concerns the individual man [not the state as such], as well as the part of theology which deals with initiations and mysteries (216<sup>b</sup>).

On the page preceding this passage, Julian had adopted the Stoic division of philosophy into only three parts. Stated otherwise, following the Stoics, he subsumes theology under physics. For him, though (as perhaps for Plato and certainly for Kant, as well as for certain "Democriteans," if not for Democritus himself), physics can be true only insofar as it is mathematical. The nonmathematical remnant of physics is for him, as for Plato in the *Timaeus*, only a bevy of "myths," that is to say, false stories presented in a more or less "believable" form. This is the case especially when the stories claim to describe a "transcendent" or divine world. It is precisely because nothing true can be said of this world, for the simple reason that it does not exist at all, that one is obliged to have recourse to myths when one intends to speak of it. Now Julian gives us to understand, in the pages which follow the passage quoted, that the use of myths by a philosopher can be justified only in ethics—and not ethics as a whole, but only that part which is addressed to individuals. Stated otherwise, when a philosopher speaks as a theorist of the state or of society, that is, of man in general or man as such, he must speak seriously and try to say the truth, avoiding all kinds of myths. A philosopher can himself tell, or have others tell, "false stories in a believable form," intending to make them pass as true, only when he wants to act as a pedagogue or as a demagogue, that is to say, when his goal is to educate individuals so that their life in common can take the form of a viable state truly worthy of the name, such as the Roman state was before its decadence.

This understood, the philosopher-Emperor believes it necessary and possible to make his thought even more specific, and to say directly that in any event myths, even edifying ones, should be told only to those who are not capable of understanding or accepting the truth. "The one who makes stories for the sake of the improvement of morals and introduces myths must not do this for men but for children, whether in age or

intelligence, who in general require such stories" (223<sup>a</sup>). And a little later he adds: "Given that myths must be told only to children, who are still at that stage by virtue of their age or their intelligence, great care must be taken [when theological myths are told so as to be believed] to transgress against neither gods nor men" (226<sup>c-d</sup>).

But, good philosopher that he was, Julian considered himself perfectly "adult." And if he gives us to understand, following all his predecessors in philosophy, that the majority of the profane are merely children, he is ready to admit at his side in the little group of true adults all the authentic philosophers, as well as the statesmen, truly worthy of that name. This is, moreover, what he explicitly says in the following passage (which continues the first of the two passages last quoted): "Now, if you [Heracleios, the symbol of the Christian bishop or theologian] have the impression that we [I and my ministerial associates] are still infants . . . then *antikyra* [a remedy against insanity] ought to be prescribed for you" (223<sup>a-b</sup>).

With these words, the circle is closed. As a philosopher, Julian is an adult in the full sense of the word, an intelligent man sufficiently disciplined and strong to be able to bear even "disagreeable" or "irritating" truths and who does not need a sugar-coating or distraction; who does not need to be told, in the place of these truths, agreeable but false stories which are "strange and contradictory" for all that, and believable only to infants. This is why the philosopher Julian repels the attempts of others to persuade him of myths, whether pagan or Christian, just as he forbids himself to tell them to himself with a view to trying to believe them.<sup>10</sup> But as Emperor, Julian is especially concerned with those who are quite young, physically or mentally. He wants them to be told edifying myths in believable forms in order that their way of life may be ameliorated.<sup>11</sup> Practically, Julian is concerned with educating the people whom he has, as Roman Emperor, consented to govern. And the philosopher seems to have been firmly convinced that the Emperor could save his empire only by having his subjects told pagan myths, and this in such a way that the great majority would begin again to believe them. But when Julian himself told myths in his philosophic writings meant only for philosophers and for certain statesmen among his friends, he did it in such a way that his chosen readers would not believe them at all, although they would divine the truths which he wished to teach in telling them. To succeed as Emperor, however, Julian had to hide from the masses of his subjects the truth which, as philosopher, he wanted to teach to a very small number of elect. And it is essentially for the ends of this camouflage, practiced for *raisons d'État*, that Julian exercised himself in that ironical art of writing which had been taught him by the ancient philosophers, who had themselves exercised it above all to

shelter themselves from persecution, but also to gratify their taste for play and jest and in order that philosophers could recognize each other more surely.

In the light of historical experience, the Emperor Julian's art of writing appears most extraordinary. For although he permitted himself to tell us unmistakably that he himself did not believe in any of the theological myths which were told with more or less success in his epoch, it is not as an atheistic philosopher but as a self-proclaimed "devout pagan" and "Neo-Platonic mystic" that history has transmitted him to us.

Telling of Julian's art of writing, I hope I have not betrayed his secret—nor, for that matter, anyone's secret—by writing the preceding pages. For these pages will say nothing of interest to those whom the Emperor wanted to exclude from the small number of comprehending readers of his philosophic writings. They will indeed say nothing at all. In the spirit of their author, these pages contain nothing other, and nothing more, than a modest *salut* addressed to the *bons entendeurs* of philosophy—over the oceans and through the centuries.

## || Notes

1. *The Works of the Emperor Julian*, trans. W. C. Wright (3 vols.; London: Heinemann, 1913), 248<sup>d</sup>–249<sup>a</sup>. All references to the writings of Julian will be to this edition.

2. It is obviously the crosiers of the bishops and not the staffs of "the philosophers" that Julian really has in view in the following invective which he pretends to address to the "Cynic" Heracleios:

Furthermore, why do you [the "Cynics"] circulate everywhere and ply not only the mules but also, as I hear tell, their drivers, who are more frightened before you than before the soldiers? For, as I hear, you use your staffs even more cruelly than the soldiers do their swords. It is therefore fitting that you also inspire them with more fear (224<sup>a</sup>).

3. As Emperor, Julian often takes issue with the "pure" intellectuals who isolate themselves from political action, and who nevertheless permit themselves to advise statesmen. He does this notably in his very ironical *Letter to the Philosopher Themistius*, in which he parodies the style of contemporary "Sophists" and cruelly derides, although again in a camouflaged form, the advice lavished on the new Emperor by his former tutor in philosophy (whom Eunapius does not mention in his *Life of the Sophists*, where he covers Julian with flowers). See more particularly 263<sup>b</sup>–267<sup>b</sup>. Letter 16 could also be quoted

on this occasion; here Julian says: "Heatedly to take up the defense and the interest of the City . . . is the mark of a philosophic soul" (*Works* Vol. III, pp. 38, 39).

4. As a general rule, the traditional epithet "great" has, for Julian, an ironical value (cf., for example, the repeated use of this term in the discourse, *On the Mother of the Gods*, especially 166<sup>a</sup>). But in the quoted passage, the meaning is double: ironical, if it is with reference to the god Helios; serious, if "Helios" signifies Reason (*Nous*). Passages with a double, even a triple, meaning are not rare for Julian. Cf. 130<sup>c</sup>; 159<sup>c</sup>; 168<sup>d</sup>; 172<sup>d</sup>; 174<sup>c-d</sup>; 222<sup>b-c</sup>; 239<sup>b-c</sup>.

5. According to the context, "no less" means the same as Iamblichus. Now, in the quoted passage (as everywhere else in his writings), Julian makes fun of Neo-Platonism in general and of Iamblichus in particular. But the ironical character of the context does not prevent the author's pedagogical intent, there expressed, from being taken seriously. Moreover, several lines earlier, Julian clearly indicates the ironical character of his discourse (which was never uttered and was sent only to Sallust and perhaps to some other philosophic friends):

. . . I dared, [my dear Sallust], to write this to you, because my preceding writing *On the Festival of Kronos (Kronia)* did not seem completely without value to you" [157<sup>e</sup>].

Now, we know that the writing in question (which has been almost completely lost) was openly satirical. Julian nonetheless said in it: "We have followed [in this work] the precepts of the illustrious hierophant Iamblichus."

6. If it is relatively easy to detect the critical irony of Julian, it is almost impossible, in the present state of our knowledge, to make his positive philosophical doctrine stand out. It is certain that Julian rejected everything called "mystic" in the Neo-Platonism inaugurated by Plotinus and Porphyry (cf., e.g., the parody found at 143<sup>c-144<sup>c</sup></sup>), his whipping boy being, moreover, the "divine" Iamblichus (cf. especially 146<sup>a-b</sup> and 157<sup>c-d</sup>). He seems equally to have rejected the Platonic theory of ideas, judged by him to be too metaphysical, and to have accepted the criticism expressed by Aristotle (cf., for example, 146<sup>a-b</sup>, where the ironical epithet "great" is joined to the name of Plato; 152<sup>b-d</sup>, where the irony is particularly obvious; 162<sup>d-165<sup>b</sup></sup>, where an ironical critique of the theory of ideas is to be found). Finally, it is probable that he followed Xenarchus' critique of the Aristotelian notion of the ether, which he himself presents (always "ironically") as a residue of "theological metaphysics" (cf. 162<sup>a-d</sup>). Furthermore, on several occasions he ridicules the eclectic tendencies of the philosophy of his time and particularly of neo-Platonism (cf., for example, 188<sup>c</sup> and 162<sup>c</sup>; *in fine*). But it is only by basing oneself on vague and rare allusions that one could conclude that Julian adhered to a "positivism," that is, to an atheistic materialism, which goes back to Democritus via Epicurus (cf., for example, 162<sup>a</sup>: "We admit [with Aristotle] a Matter, but also a material Form; however, if a prior cause is not superimposed on them [following Plato, Aristotle, and the Neo-Platonists], we unwittingly



introduce the opinion of Epicurus"). This hypothetical interpretation would become absolutely certain if the author of the small treatise, *Of the Gods and of the World*, were the same Sallust who was Julian's friend. For the credo of that author (which is openly expressed in chapter XVII, the other chapters being "ironical") is clearly Democritean and atheistic. But it is possible that the "Sallust" in question is only one of the pseudonyms of Damscius (alias "Marinus" as the supposed author of the so-called biography of Proclus, a pamphlet as ironical as it is ferocious). It seems, moreover, that Damscius, himself a "materialist" and a notorious atheist, knew the writings of Julian very well and imitated him in his own *Vita Isidori* (which is in fact only a persiflage of neo-Platonism), and whose "diadochian Isidorus," moreover, never existed. As to Julian's anti-Christianity, it is universally known because it was publicly avowed. But it has perhaps not been sufficiently emphasized that the Emperor-philosopher was "Nietzschean" or "Hegelian" before his time, insofar as he reproached Judeo-Christianity above all for being a "religion of slaves" (cf. 195<sup>c</sup>-196<sup>c</sup>; 199<sup>d</sup>; 207<sup>a</sup>-208<sup>a</sup>; 213<sup>b</sup>; 238<sup>c-d</sup>). Cf. also fr. 5: "They [the Christian soldiers] knew only how to pray [but were unfit for combat]" (*Works* Vol. III, pp. 298 and 299).

7. With regard to the Platonic origin of Julian's "irony," the following ("ironical") passage from the discourse, *In Response to the Cynic Heracleios*, is particularly characteristic:

He [Plato in the *Philebus* and the *Timaeus*] insists that everything the poets say of the gods be implicitly believed, and that no proof for what they say be demanded of them. But I have quoted here this passage [*Timaeus*, 40<sup>a-e</sup>, which Julian obviously considers "ironical," although he must have known that this same passage was taken literally and seriously by the author of the *Epinomis*] solely so that you ["Heracleios," here the symbol of the Christian theologian] will not be able to pretend, as many Platonists do, that Socrates' being naturally ironic is a ground for slighting the Platonic doctrine. For these words are not uttered by Socrates, but by Timaeus, who is least of all ironical. [This shows, incidentally, that Julian did not take at all seriously the myths of a pseudo-scientific cast that Plato jokingly put in the mouth of Timaeus to make fun of him (aiming perhaps at Eudoxus, or the young Aristotle, who was impressed and influenced by Eudoxus to the point of breaking with the philosophy of the Academy).] For that matter, it is not sound, instead of examining what is said, to ask who says it and to whom the speeches are addressed. [An ironical passage, which shows that Julian knew full well that it is, on the contrary, only by posing these last two questions that the dialogues of Plato can be correctly interpreted.] Must I now refer you again to the omniscient Siren, the image of the messenger-god Hermes and the friend of Apollo and the Muses [namely, Aristotle]? He thinks that to those who ask if there are gods or who, in a general manner, undertake a [critical] study of this subject, one must not give an answer as to human beings, but administer a punishment as to beasts (237<sup>b-d</sup>).

Evidently, Julian did not greatly appreciate people who take things too seriously, particularly in matters of religion or science, but also of politics and *raisons d'État*. On several occasions he paid tribute to the philosophers of the past who knew how to joke, putting Democritus at their head beside Plato.

Does he not himself say in his discourse, *To the Uneducated Dogs (or Cynics)* (who are not the neo-Cynics, but the Christian monks):

The often-mentioned *Tragedies* of Diogenes are really the work of a certain Philiscos of Aegina; but even if they did come from Diogenes himself, it would still not be surprising if the wise man was playing in them; for we know that many philosophers [certainly Plato] appear to have done this. In fact, it is told that Democritus too used to laugh at the sight of [nonphilosophic] men being serious (186°).

The same attitude toward philosophic play is found again at 201<sup>a-c</sup>; 222<sup>b-c</sup> (an ironical passage with a double meaning); 148<sup>b</sup>; as well as at the beginning of the satirical writing, *The Caesars*, in which Julian explicitly refers to Plato in speaking of "serious tales"; he says there (ironically) of himself: "I am not able to cause laughter or amusement" (306<sup>a</sup>).

8. Cf. 170<sup>a-c</sup>, quoted above, wherein Julian opposes "those who are exceptional in intelligence," who recognize the fictitious character of those myths by observing "their strangeness and their contradictory character," to the "profane," who believe theological myths taken literally.

9. Having thus analyzed the religious attitude which he attributes to Alexander (solely for the needs of his case), Julian opposes to this his own philosophic (atheistic) attitude, saying: "As for us [for the Emperor Julian and for us philosophers], who always content ourselves with what we actually have, and do not aspire at all to what is afar ["transcendental"], we certainly rejoice when our [human] herald praises us . . ." (251°). In this text, the philosopher seems to be speaking as a faithful disciple of Epicurus. In other passages of analogous content, the Emperor speaks rather as a "Stoic." In his discourse, *On King Helios*, for example, at the end of an ironic, ambiguous "personal prayer" that he addresses to "Helios," he says:

May he ["Helios," here the pagan divinity whom the Emperor recommends without believing in him] be willing to grant all that I have just [156°-157<sup>a</sup>] prayed for [ironically parodying the Neo-Platonic hymns], and grant and preserve graciously [now seriously addressing himself to Helios as *nous* or human philosophic reason which, as a philosopher, he venerates while writing of it only covertly] for the entire State an eternal support, as far as this is possible. As for us [we, the Emperor Julian, and we philosophers], may "Helios" [*nous*] grant us success in human and divine things [according to the well-known Stoic definition of philosophy, in our philosophic researches] as long as he permits us to live [on earth]; but may he permit us to live and to dedicate ourselves while we live to the tasks of the State as long as this pleases him, is good for us and profitable for the Roman Empire (157<sup>b</sup>).

Julian takes up the same theme a page later, in the ambiguous passage, both ironical and serious, with which the whole discourse ends:

For the third time, I ask of the universal monarch "Helios" [ironically if the appeal is made to the god, seriously if it is a question of human reason] . . . to accord me his grace, to grant me a good life, more perfect understanding and a divine reason (*nous*), to arrange for me as gentle a departure from life as is possible, at the fitting moment [necessarily] determined by

destiny (εἰμαρμένη); and to permit me thereafter to rise toward him and to remain near him, if that is possible, forever [which Julian certainly does not believe]; if however this must be [as Julian himself thinks it must] a [religious] desire which goes beyond my merits in this life, may it at the very least [but, of course, *per impossibile*] be for numerous and lengthy periods of time (158<sup>b-c</sup>).

Let us finally note that this last passage is found again almost word for word in the last chapter (it is also both ironical and serious, although not at all tragic) of the small work already mentioned which is traditionally attributed to a certain "Sallust."

10. Cf. *The Caesars* 318<sup>b</sup>: "Gods ought to test and investigate the truth, and not persuasiveness or seductiveness" (including the "sweet spices" of myths of any type whatsoever).

11. Cf. *The Caesars* 314<sup>c-d</sup>:

You [the Emperor Probus] were too austere and always harsh, never yielding. You have suffered unjustly and yet fittingly. One cannot govern horses, cattle, mules, and still less men, without conceding something to what gratifies them. It is thus that doctors sometimes make small concessions [sweetening bitter medications] to the sick, in order to find them obedient on great occasions. "What, Papa [Silenus]," says Dionysus, "Are you going philosophic on us?" "Why not, my boy! . . . Let us then mix some serious words with our laughing ones!"